

Hot News on Warming

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IF YOU'RE trying to decide whether to be an optimist or a pessimist on global warming, recent news is enough to leave you dizzy. An icebreaker found open water at the North Pole, prompting a new wave of attention to the thinning polar ice cap. That seemed like bad news, although some oceanographers said summertime cracks in Arctic ice aren't new, and this one shouldn't be over-interpreted. Texas, the state that produces the most greenhouse gas emissions, for the first time took steps to study the extent of those emissions and consider possible ways to reduce them. That was good news, although it doesn't guarantee state action. And Dr. James Hansen, a leader in drawing government attention to global warming, published a report suggesting that it may be "more practical to slow global warming than is sometimes assumed" by focusing in the short term on cutting heat-trapping gases other than carbon dioxide. That was surprising news, at least to those of us who have seen the climate-change fight centering on reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

It's long been known that carbon dioxide isn't the only gas that helps hold heat in the atmosphere. Six "greenhouse gases" were included in the Kyoto protocol, the international agreement that calls for cutting emissions by 2012. But carbon dioxide, the most abundant greenhouse gas, has dominated the public debate. It has been a subject of contention because it is a byproduct of burning fossil fuels, such as coal and gas, that drive modern industrial society. American opponents of the Kyoto protocol have argued that the reductions it requires could wreck the economy.

Dr. Hansen and a team of colleagues wrote that most of the global warming so far observed actually has come from other greenhouse gases such as methane, chlorofluorocarbons, and gases that combine to create ozone in smog. They suggested a strategy of focusing first on cutting those gases and black particles of soot that also trap heat. Some of the gases involved are already in decline because of other international restrictions; going after others amounts to an attack on air pollution, which the scientists argue should be attractive action in all parts of the world, independent of concerns about warming, because of the health benefits of cleaner air.

That optimistic scenario immediately caused some environmentalists to worry that the report would become a weapon for those who are skeptical about warming—who oppose any action. Dr. Hansen himself said it undoubtedly will be used that way, but that would be a misreading of the study. The new report does not challenge either the evidence that surface temperatures are going up or the growing consensus that human activities are contributing to the increase. It continues to cite the need for reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. There is no suggestion, nor should there be, that response to global warming should wait until the science is more certain.

What it does do is remind us that climate issues are complex, far from fully understood and open to a variety of approaches. It should serve as a caution to environmentalists so certain of their position that they're willing to advocate radical solutions, no matter what the economic cost. It suggests that the sensible course is to move ahead with a strong dose of realism and flexibility, focusing on approaches that are economically viable, that serve other useful purposes such as cutting dependence on foreign oil or improving public health, and that can help support international consensus for addressing climate change. If the Hansen report pushes the discussion in that direction, it will turn out to be good news indeed.